

From Abraham to Moses
Yom Kippur 2016

(With apologies to the musical RENT)

Five hundred twenty five thousand six hundred minutes. How do you measure a year in the life? In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee...

In weddings, bar mitzvahs, baby namings, in endless sermons... How do you measure twenty years in a life?

How about love? Measure in love.

I am so grateful for the love, the attention, as yes, the patience that you have shown to me over the past twenty years. You have listened to my stories: stories of my mother's shoes, my lost cell phones, passports and glasses. Together, we have shared tales of cottage cheese and a cottage of candles, and each year we have struggled to regard Israel from a new perspective. We have held on to each other through the loss of loved ones and friends. We have celebrated each holiday in its turn, dancing at weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs as family and community. Through good times and bad, it has all been measured in love.

We have now come to a time of transition, a moment of change, as I will be stepping down as your full time rabbi at the end of June 2017. What am I going to do next? What is the next chapter in the Book of the Malibu Jewish Center and Synagogue? I would like to quote the words of the late comedienne Gilda Radner:

I wanted a perfect ending. I sat down to write a book with the ending in place before there even was an ending. Now I've learned the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end. Like my life, this story is about not knowing, having to change, taking the

moment and making the best of it, without knowing what is going to happen next.

I must admit that when I accepted this job as your Rabbi in July of 1996, I had no idea of where this story was headed. I was in Santa Fe, about to go on retreat in the mountains of New Mexico, when George Greenberg called to offer me the job. I was a bit surprised, as I had really only been applying for a High Holiday “gig”. I responded that I could not return right away, but would complete my precious silent retreat, and give him an answer within a week. I drove to the Lama Foundation north of Taos, and made my way up the hill to the High Hermitage at 10,000 feet. Alone, with only my sleeping bag, some provisions and wood for a fire, I settled in for duration.

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test.

In 1996, my very first High Holiday service at MJCS, I told this story based on the Torah portion for Rosh Hashanah. I feel that it is appropriate to share it with you today.

And God said to him, “Abraham “and he answered “Heneni”, Here I am”. “Take your son, your favored one, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will show you.” So early the next morning Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place. On the third day, he saw the place from afar; Then Abraham said to his servants “You stay here. The boy and I will go up there, we will worship and return to you.

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering, and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; the two of them walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered “Yes my son”. And he said, “Here are

the firestone and the firewood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering? “ And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.

New Mexico. It was a clear August morning. I rose early and set out for a special vista point that was even higher than my cabin. In front of me, layer after layer of blue grey mountains were arrayed as I sat down to do my morning daavening. I lifted my eyes, and I could envision our ancestor Abraham seeing similar hills as he walked in silence over the mountains with his son.

And then, I looked down. I realized that I was perched on a pile of firewood, cut and assembled, next to a fire pit. In moments, I became Isaac, bound to the woodpile, dazed and uncomprehending. Terrified, I understood that I was the sacrifice. I felt as if I lay on that wood for an eternity, even if it was only a few moments, waiting for the knife. I was frozen in place, bound to the spot. I do not really know what released me- there were no voices and no rams, but when I arose, I felt wondrous, clean, renewed. Heneni, I heard a voice inside of my head proclaim. I am ready. Here I am.

Twenty years later, I am beginning to understand what it meant to sit on that wood, prepared to-and-for-sacrifice. For me, to be a Rabbi is a calling, not a career. When someone answers a call to fulfill one's true vocation, one can not put in stipulations for better hours or overtime. Those free evenings are often sacrificed for a meeting or phone call with someone in distress. Those days of long, luxurious retreat time alone were now over. I was Rabbi at an MJCS bar mitzvah within a week of my husband Eddie's death- it was not the bar mitzvah child's fault that I was in mourning. Most of all, my ego was placed on the fire, over and over again. Not everyone at MJCS was in love with the idea of a female rabbi. In retrospect, I now understand that in some way, my ego, my desire to control the direction of my life had been placed on the altar. If I was to heed

that call, at age 50, to become “Rabbi”, then I needed to follow that call, even into the unknown wilds of Malibu.

*And an angel of God called out to him from heaven: Abraham! Abraham! And he answered, “Heneni. Here I am”. And he said Do not raise your hand against the boy...when Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in a thicket- in Hebrew “sefach” by his horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.
. And Abraham named the site Adonai Yereh; on the Mount of the Lord there is vision.*

I lowered myself off of the woodpile, and began my decent towards the cabin, two thousand feet below. Down, down, under the clouds, and suddenly, it became dark. I tried to follow the path, but there were only faint markings, and I found myself in a thicket. Like Abraham’s ram, I was literally caught in the *sefach*. I was forced to my knees. The branches tore at my face and my clothing. I panicked. I could not stand upright, and could not see in the blackened darkness. Suddenly, I was not only Isaac but also the ram, caught in the web of bramble and thorns. This time, the sacrifice was not a metaphor. I was completely caught, ensnared in the thicket. There was nothing left to do but pray.

And pray I did. Not the half awake murmured prayer of my morning daavening, but desperate, beseeching prayer of the heart. God, please do not abandon me to the night. Even though I crawl through the valley of the shadow of death.... At last. I regained my composure, and slowly inched my way along. Finally I was able to stand, walk, and make my way out. Only then did I see the reality. I was only fifty yards from the cabin for hours, just approaching it from an unfamiliar perspective. The destination was so close. “*On the mount of the Lord there is vision*” but the thicket, the brambles, and our fears make it so difficult to see our way clear.

I spent the rest of the retreat absorbing, praying, singing, and praying some more. The week ended, and I descended the mountain. It was time to make the call to Malibu. “Go on”, advised a Buddhist friend who drove to Albuquerque with me. “Take it for a year, then you’ll see. It can’t hurt!”

Twenty years later, I can see that there has been quite a lot of pain, but it didn’t hurt at all. On the contrary, these have been among the best years of my life.

Of course, there were snags, and at moments I have felt like the ram “caught in the sefach.” When I first arrived, a group of elderly gentlemen took it upon themselves to express their displeasure by attending our small Friday night service, and getting up to make noise in the kitchen while I was giving a sermon. A few months into this process, one of them, Abe Friedman (z”l) stuck his head out and said Shah! She’s saying something important. Be quiet! He took his walker and marched to the front row and sat down to listen. He became a fan- as did most of the others, and I buried them all with a fair amount of love and compassion.

We have been though so much together. A fire in 1996, just months after I arrived, would have taken us to the ground were it not for the brave Malibu firemen. Some years later, we faced embezzlement by a trusted employee. An economic upheaval eight years ago almost led to a foreclosure. No only did we survive, but we are strong, almost debt free-thanks to the generosity of our major donors- and soon we will be able to take down our “temporary” buildings of twenty-five years and complete our campus.

On the mountain of the Lord there is vision”

Emily and Sheldon Lodmer had a vision of a synagogue here in Malibu, and many of the founding members of MJCS are here in the room today. Rabbi Neil Weinberg was the first Rabbi, followed by

Rabbi Benjamin Herzon. There are so many visionaries here today that I will only mention the synagogue presidents, who have guided us through the thicket: Dennis Seider, Stuart Seidner, Dan Ross, George Greenberg, Ellen Wolf, Bruce Friedman, Alex Fragan, and now, Steve Weinberg is at the helm. Their vision expanded and grew in response to changes in Malibu and in the Jewish world. Under their guidance, we have become a model of a relevant, inclusive Jewish community, offering a place for study, prayer, and fun!

We have become family, and as family, we are so proud of our children. Just look at how many of the next generation have read Torah this High Holy Day season. When I came, only Walter Young (z'l) and Tony Greenberg read Torah, and now, you have to share a line if you want to be included. Of course, credit goes to Cantor Marcelo, who has patiently changed the culture of this synagogue-with a Latin beat!”

Investment in our children takes time. But we have seen it come to fruition. There is so much despair in the organized Jewish world about the loss of youth, but in this synagogue, it is amazing how many of our kids remain attached, and deepening their Jewish connections as adults. As I look around the room- Zack Lodmer, son of Sheldon and Emily, is a father, a lawyer, and has just taken a job as the head of Youth Initiatives at the Jewish Federation. Rosalia Greenberg, daughter of George and Victoria, is a professional photographer who is now engaged to Daniel, the nicest nice Jewish boy you can imagine. Ray, of Steve and Dana Weinberg, spent the High School years volunteering here in our school, and now is headed for a career in social advocacy. Eric Czubiak, son of Joy and Bob, spent last year as a leader of Moishe House, a Jewish student housing project on in downtown LA, and now heads off to New York for a job with a prestigious firm. Doctor Michel Seider, son of Dennis and Leah, got married right in this room, and Michael and Lauren have just enrolled their two-year-old Caleb in a Jewish

preschool. The list goes on and on, as our children take the Jewish values that they have absorbed here out to repair the world. Henry Stern, who was a young teen when I arrived, became involved in Jewish leadership here while in Malibu High, and is now running for State Senate! (Please stand up) We are so proud, of all of you. Tales of the demise of Jewish youth in America are highly overrated.

On the mount of the Lord here is vision.

The vision of a beautiful, open-air sanctuary existed before I arrived at MJCS, and it was my honor to help see it through to its completion. But those who have the vision do not always get to see the work completed in their lifetime. Sadly, two of our most important visionaries, Richard Green and Stuart Seidner, men who dedicated their lives to the conception and construction of this very building, did not get to see it inaugurated in their lifetimes. A month before the dedication, Stuart Seidner lost his life in a tragic car accident on the way to a Passover Seder, and a few weeks later Building Campaign Chair Richard Green succumbed to cancer. As is said in the mishnah of Pirke Avot, the Sayings of the Fathers:

LO ALECHA HAMLACHA L'GMOR(2:21)

Rabbi Tarfon taught: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either" (2:16). Lo Alecha L'Gmor. You must do everything possible to work towards a goal, even if completion does not, can not happen in your lifetime.

Abraham may have inspired my first sermon, but twenty years later, my biblical guide has become Moses, who did not desist from the task, even though he was clearly told that he would NOT enter the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy we read:

I pleaded with God at that time, saying...Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan. The Lord said to me “ Enough! Never speak to me of this matter again .Go up to the summit of Pisgah, and gaze about to the west to the north, to the south to the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across yonder Jordan, Give Joshua his instructions, and imbue him with strength and courage, for he shall go across as the head of this people ,into the land that you may only see.

From the beginning of the Jewish people, it has been clear that our leaders will not see the fulfillment of God’s promises in their lifetime, and will have to move forward of faith alone. God’s first words to Abram are “*Lech Lecha*”, get moving, and *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing... (.BUT) Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs and they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.*

It will take four hundred years for God’s promise to Abraham to be fulfilled . Even Moses, the visionary prophet who saw God face to face, can not see the fulfillment of his dreams. The vision, the hope can only be passed l’dor v’dor, from generation to generation.

This month, one of the great visionaries of our generation, Shimon Peres, died at age 93. Along with the founder of the State of Israel, David ben Gurion, and his friend and sometimes rival Itzhak Rabin, Peres had a vision of peace between Israel and its neighbors that is still very far from fruition. *Lo Alecha l’Gmor. It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either.*" Peace may have to wait until the next generation, but we can not abandon the dream.

When asked what was his biggest mistake, Peres replied, “The only thing that I regret is that I did not dream big enough... For me,

dreaming is simply being pragmatic... The most important thing in life is to dare”

Looking back, I now see that coming off of a mountaintop in New Mexico and taking this job was pretty daring, even though it did not seem so at the time. We have done so much together to make this a vibrant-and peaceful- community, and there is so much more to complete. Our vision includes a capital campaign that will replace the temporary school buildings, and the building of a chapel for smaller services and events. A very generous donor has offered matching funds, but we will need to raise the money. The Planning Commission of Malibu, however, moves at its own pace, and it is likely that I will not see the new buildings come to completion during this next year .

Lo Alecha Hamalacha l’Gmor. It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either."

Throughout this coming year, I will do whatever is necessary to guide this process forward. Much like Moses, I have a voice inside of me that wants to see things tidy and complete before retiring. Just the building... Just the weddings of all of my first confirmation classes... just the bar or bat mitzvah of your youngest child... or your grandchild... If I could only see the Malibu Jewish Center and Synagogue with an established Endowment fund, a paid off mortgage, a twenty five percent growth in membership... the list goes on. I will dedicate myself to “the work” of seeing these things happen this year, but a synagogue vision, much less a vision for the direction of Judaism in the 21st century, is rarely completed in one rabbi’s tenure.

I have been allowed to see, and to experience so much in these past twenty years, and I am so grateful to each one of you. Thank you for

trusting me with the most intimate moments of joy and sorrow...
(rent melody) of weddings, and funerals, bar mitzvahs and
grandbaby namings...How do you measure twenty years in the life ?

You measure in Love, You measure in Love.

What happens next? To be honest, I don't really know. I hear the
words of Gilda Radner:

*I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned the hard way, that
some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear
beginning, middle and end. Like my life, this story is about not
knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the
best of it, without knowing what is going to happen next.*

I do not know what will happen, who will be the new rabbi, or how I
will be integrated into our synagogue as Rabbi Emeritus. But one
thing is certain. We will continue to be a part of each other's lives,
l'dor v'dor, from generation to generation, with a GREAT measure
of love.

May we all be inscribed TOGETHER for another year in the
Book of Life.